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ABSTRACT

There is a longstanding cultural stereotype that women tend to be more empathic than men. For many years this stereotype has been upheld by theory and research in fields as diverse as psychoanalysis, social, developmental, personality, and feminist psychology. This study was designed to clarify further the relationship of empathy to gender and sex role orientation. Relationships among gender, sex role orientation, ego development, and different forms of empathy were also examined. The Empathy Scoring System, a new, unobtrusive and multidimensional system for measuring empathy, was used to score empathy from the qualitative interviews of 30 married men and 30 married women who participated in a larger study of young adult close relationships. No significant differences were found in empathy scores. Sex role orientation, however, was significantly related to empathy but in different ways for men and women. These results suggest a more complex relationship among gender, sex role orientation, and empathy than has been proposed by theory and research to date. (Author/ABL)

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ABSTRACT

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EMPATHY: ARE WOMEN REALLY MORE EMPATHIC THAN MEN?

by

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This study provides a further investigation of the controversial topic of gender differences in empathy. The Empathy Scoring System (Monahan, 1989), a new, unobtrusive and multidimensional system for measuring empathy, was used to score empathy from the qualitative interviews of 30 married men and 30 married women who participated in a larger study of young adult close relationships. No significant gender differences were found in empathy scores. Sex role orientation, however, was significantly related to empathy but in different ways for men and women. These results suggest a more complex relationship among gender, sex role orientation, and empathy than has been proposed by theory and research to date.

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There is a longstanding cultural stereotype that women tend to be more empathic than men. For many years this stereotype has been upheld by theory and research in fields as diverse as psychoanalysis, social, developmental, personality, and femininist psychology.

Sociological and psychological theories have supported the notion of empathy as an aspect of women's communal or "expressive" role. Parsons & Bales (1955), examined the behaviors of men and women with respect to traditional roles. They described males as having an "instrumental" role, which required that they serve as a liaison between the family and society, while women are socialized to assume an "expressive" role which, facilitates interpersonal harmony in the family.

Bakan's (1966) conceptualization of a duality of yearnings in human existence expands upon the notions of Parsons and Bales. Bakan describes two orientations in life: communion (interdependance with others), and agency (independance and autonomy). Recent theoretical endeavors (e.g., Carlson, 1972; Gilligan, 1979; Franz & White, 1985, Hassan & Bar-Yam, 1987) have sought to correct a male bias toward autonomy and separation evident in many theories of human development by integrating into their theories the developmental need of both sexes for communion and interpersonal connectedness. Although these more recent efforts have begun to address the importance of relationships in the interpersonal development of both sexes, there continues to be no current theory which contradicts or challenges the stereotype regarding sex differences in empathy (Hoffman, 1977; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983).

In a recent review of the literature on sex differences in empathy and related capacities, Eisenberg

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and Lennon (1983) have called into question the strength of research findings indicating that women are higher in empathy, defined as a vicarious affective response (Hoffman, 1977; Hoffman & Levine, 1976; Feshbach, 1982). In their thorough review of research findings and meta-analysis of the results of many different types of studies of empathy, Eisenberg and Lennon concluded that research findings of sex differences in empathy as a vicarious emotional response are, at best, inconsistent. They attribute this inconsistency to the different methods used to measure empathy. They noted that the clearest evidence in support of gender differences is found when self-report measures were used. Weaker sex differences were found with different methodologies, such as asking subjects to rate their responses in a contrived situation, or using physiological and/or facial/gestural measures. Eisenberg and Lennon argue that many of the sex differences found when using self-report measures may be due to the subject's adherence to the sex-role expectations tapped by these measures rather than an innate mechanism or predisposition for women to be more empathic. These authors believe that as sex roles in Western culture become less distinct the findings of sex differences in self report measures of empathy will also decrease.

Foushee, Davis and Archer (1979) provide some empirical support for the theoretical relationship between a communal or feminine sex role orientation and empathy. They found, however, that this relationship occurred regardless of gender (i.e., feminine sex role orientation was positively related to self-ratings of empathy in <u>both</u> sexes, while ratings of masculinity were negatively correlated with empathy).

This study was designed to clarify further the relationship of empathy to gender and sex role orientation. First, this study responded to criticisms regarding conceptual and methodological problems in empathy research by addressing the need for a new and integrative method for measuring empathy (Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Davis, 1983; Gladstein, 1983; Barrett-Lennard, 1981). The Empathy Scoring System (Monahan, 1989) has reconceptualized empathy as a multidimensional and relational construct rather than a unitary, individual difference trait. The ESS was developed to measure different forms of empathy (see Table 1 below) in the qualitative descriptions of young married adults. The advantages of the ESS are;

1. it expands the operational definition of empathy,
2. it places the study of empathy within a salient, relational context (i.e., marriage) and,

3. it is a completely unobtrusive measure that does not involve a direct pull for sex role differences (like self-report measures of empathy).

Secondly, the study addressed the controversial question of sex differences in empathy by investigating the relationships among gender, sex role orientation, ego development, and the different forms of empathy measured by the ESS.

METHOD

Subjects were 30 married males and 30 married females who participated in a longitudinal cross-sectional study of interpersonal relationships (White et al, 1983). Subjects were between the ages of 22 and 27. The sample was largely white, middle-class, and fairly well educated. At the time of data collection, the majority of subjects were either employed or students.

Qualitative interviews in which subjects discussed different aspects of marital intimacy were scored for empathy using the Empathy Scoring System (ESS). As shown in Table 1, empathy was conceptualized as having three primary components: Cognitive Role-taking, with Affective and Cognitive subcomponents, Emotional Responding and Empathic Extension.

TABLE 1

COMPONENT	DEFINITION
Cognitive Role-taking/ Affective (CR/a) Cognitive (CR/c)	the cognitive assessment by one person of the other's affective (CR/a) or cognitive (CR/c) state
Emotional Responding (ER):	a vicarious affective response to the other's affective state
Empathic Extension (EE):	the empathic extension of self toward the other in a behavioral response to the other's affective or cognitive state

Cognitive Role-taking is conceptually-linked to perspective-taking (Selman, 1975), and refers to the cognitive assessment by one person of the other's affective or cognitive state. In simpler terms, it means understanding the other persons' feelings (affect) or thoughts (cognition). An example of an interview statement

which would be scored for the Cognitive Role-taking/Affective component of empathy would be "I can usually tell if something is bothering her when she walks in the door at night". This statement reflects the husband's recognition of his wife's affective state, or feelings.

An example of the Cognitive Role-taking/Cognitive component can be found in the statement "I don't think he realized what he was doing when he got married." This statement reflects the wife's appraisal of her husband's cognition or thinking in relation to his getting married.

The Emotional Responding component of empathy refers to the vicarious affective response (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) of one person to the other's affective state -- or in other words, the "feeling along with the other" form of empathy. This component of empathy is captured in this example: "because he was so upset, I just got so upset, and it was like there was a real feeling that we were both sharing."

The Empathic Extension component of empathy refers to a behavioral response to the other's affective or cognitive state. Empathic Extension is a behavioral or action-oriented form of empathy and can include physical or verbal actions such as offering emotional support, changing a behavior, or listening, as in the following example, "his parents went through a divorce and that was a really difficult time for him, he just needed a lot of listening." Empathic Extension is usually scored in conjunction with a Cognitive Role-taking score as an Empathy Blend, since one must first be aware of the other's cognitive or affective state in order to behave empathically.

Interview statements reflecting these components were scored +1, while statements indicating a clear lack of empathy were scored -1. Total Empathy Rating scores were then obtained by summing the scores in each interview. A Global Rating Scale (GRS) score, which is derived from an 8-point scale designed to reflect the developmental level of the scored empathy statements, was then assigned. Satisfactory interrater reliability for the ESS has been obtained (for two independent raters, TER: r=.79 and .88; GRS: r=.85 and .90). The pattern of intercorrelations among the different components of the ESS indicate that while it is measuring different components of empathy, it also has a high degree of internal consistency.

Sex role orientation was measured using the Costos (1986) modification of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem,

1974). This modification reconceptualizes masculinity and femininity as Bakan's (1966) constructs of agency and communion. Agency involves individual concerns such as independence, self-protection and self-assertion, while communion is an orientation toward others which involves interdependence and interpersonal concerns and has been conceptually linked with empathy.

Ego development [which reflects the internal, sense-making framework of the self in relation to the others and the world (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Loevinger, 1979)] refers to the individual's stage or level of developmental maturity. This was measured by the Washington University Sentence Completion Test.

RESULTS

Construct Validation

Initial evidence for the substantive, structural, and external components of construct validation of the Empathy Scoring System was quite encouraging. Findings of high interrater reliability between the author and two independent raters, good internal consistency, and some convergent validity with the Bem Sex Role Inventory and Washingon University Sentence Completion Test indicate a promising start for this measure.

Gender Differences

There were no significant differences between men and women on Empathy Scoring System (ESS) component scores or final scores. Only a marginal tendency ($p<.10$) toward a greater number of Cognitive Role-taking/Cognitive scores was found in women. These findings suggest that gender alone does not contribute to empathy as measured by the ESS.

On the Bem communion scale, women scored significantly higher ($p<.01$) than the men. In addition, there was a marginal tendency ($p<.10$) toward higher agency in men.

Sex Role Orientation

When sex role orientation was examined in relation to empathy, two distinct patterns of relationship emerged for men and women. The results indicated that it is only when women and men rate themselves as high in characteristics that are the opposite of the traditional sex role stereotype (i.e., communion in men, and agency in women), that significant relationships can be found with different components of empathy.

For example, the higher women rated themselves in agency or self-oriented characteristics such as self assertion and self protection, the lower they scored in the cognitive perspective-taking or CR/c component of empathy-- and vice versa ($r = -.35$, $p < .05$). In other words, women who were high in agency made fewer statements indicated an understanding of the thinking of their spouses, while women who were lower in agency, tended to do more cognitive perspective-taking in regard to their spouses. There were no significant relationships among empathy and communion scores in the women.

For men, a different pattern of relationships was apparent. First of all, agency was not negatively linked with empathy as in the women. Instead, the higher the men in the sample rated themselves on a communal orientation the more empathic behaviors they described toward their spouses ($r = .34$, $p < .05$), and their empathy final scores were higher as well. So for men, being more other-oriented or communal seems to be related to the more action-oriented forms of empathy, or more Empathic Extension scores, toward their wives. These results support recent theories (Brody, 1985; Hoffman, 1977; Buck, Miller & Caul, 1974) that males and females may express affect or empathy via different modalities, where women express it overtly through words and facial expressions and men may express it internally or through instrumental behaviors.

These results indicate that there is not just a simple sex difference between men and women in empathy, or even a consistent global association between sex role orientation and empathy. These results are inconsistent with previous theory (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983) and research (Foushee, Davis & Archer, 1979). which led to the expectation that a communal orientation should have been positively related to the all the different components of empathy in both men and women. Instead, these differing relationships among forms of empathy and sex role orientation for men and women suggest a more complex relationship among these variables.

Ego Development

Gender differences were also found in the pattern of relationships among ego development, empathy and sex role orientation scores. Men with higher levels of ego development also had higher levels of the cognitive perspective taking component of empathy. In other words, men who were more developmentally mature tended to make more statements indicating an understanding of the thinking of their wives. This would make theoretical sense since perspective-taking and empathy in general are thought to be

characteristics of higher levels of ego development (Loevinger, 1976; Jordan, 1984; Jordan, Surrey & Kaplan, 1983). I also found that men with higher levels of ego development tended to have lower self-ratings of agency. This means that men who tend to see themselves in more traditional masculine terms tend to be at the lower, more role-oriented levels of ego development, and conversely, men who are less traditional in their sex role orientation and more communal tend to be at the higher levels of ego development.

Interestingly, it was only in the males that significant relationships with ego development appeared; there were no significant relationships among ego development and any of the study variables in women. Obviously, the variables of ego development, sex role orientation and empathy work differently for men and women.

In summary, this study has taken steps toward further understanding of the complex phenomenon of empathy;

- first, by the development and initial construct validation of the Empathy Scoring System, a new method for measuring empathy from qualitative data,
- then, by reconceptualizing empathy as a relational construct and studying it within the important natural context of marriage,
- and finally, by further clarifying the nature of differences between the sexes in empathy, by examining sex differences in the different components of empathy measured by the Empathy Scoring System and the differing relationships among empathy, sex role orientation and ego development in young married adults.

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